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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000015

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [ASEC](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAI GOVERNMENT ASCRIBES BOMBINGS TO POLITICAL
OPPONENTS

REF: A. BANGKOK 3 (WINAI ON BOMBINGS)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2 (BOMBINGS)

[1](#)C. 06 BANGKOK 7594 (CASE AGAINST THAKSIN)

[1](#)D. 06 BANGKOK 6689 (TAK BAI CHARGES DROPPED)

[1](#)E. 06 BANGKOK 5747 (HAT YAI BOMBINGS)

[1](#)F. 06 BANGKOK 5610 (ANALYZING BOMBS)

[1](#)G. 06 BANGKOK 5349 (YALA BANKS BOMBED)

[1](#)H. 06 BANGKOK 5204 (CAR BOMB)

[1](#)I. 06 BANGKOK 1845 (BOMB AT DEMOCRAT HQ)

[1](#)J. 06 BANGKOK 1521 (UPDATE: BOMB AT PREM'S HOUSE)

[1](#)K. 06 BANGKOK 684 (NO ATTACKS OUTSIDE SOUTH)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Thailand's Prime Minister said publicly on January 1 that political opponents linked to deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra likely carried out the New Year's Eve bombings in Bangkok. Other credible theories exist, however, and the physical evidence does not yet implicate a particular group. The bombs appear similar to those built by southern militants, who have a history of conducting multiple, simultaneous bomb attacks, although they have not previously shown a desire or capability to operate outside of the southern region. Some people will suspect that the security forces themselves staged the bombings as a provocation to justify remaining in power. Whoever the culprit, we are not optimistic the perpetrators will be caught, and the Prime Minister's ascribing the bombings to political opponents could impede the investigation. Barring arrests, the perpetrators may retain the capability and motive to conduct further attacks. While foreigners were injured in the December 31 bombings, none of the bombing sites appear to have been selected in order to target foreign interests. End Summary.

SURAYUD POINTS A FINGER AT THAKSIN'S CAMP

[1](#)2. (SBU) On the evening of December 31, six bombs exploded at various sites in Bangkok between 6:00 and 6:30 p.m.; two more exploded seconds after midnight. Three Thais died from blast injuries, and up to 55 other people were injured, including nine foreigners (no Americans). In a January 1 public statement, Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont said: "From the evidence we have gathered, there is a slim chance that (the string of bombings) is related to the southern insurgency. It is likely related to people who lost their political benefits." The latter reference clearly pointed

toward deposed Prime Minister Thaksin and his associates.

¶3. (SBU) Council for National Security (CNS) Chairman Sonthi Boonyaratglin publicly echoed Surayud's remarks later the same day, saying the government had detected "some links to the masterminds but never expected they would do something like this." Sonthi said the CNS had summoned for questioning four former aides of Thaksin: close Thaksin advisor Prommin Lertsuridej; former Deputy Prime Minister Chidchai Vanasatidya (retired Police General); former National Intelligence Agency Director (and retired Police General) Chumphol Manmai; and Police Lieutenant General Chalor Chuwong. According to media reports, however, none of the four appeared for questioning; Prommin reportedly excused himself, claiming the timing of the summons was inconvenient.

¶4. (C) In the days prior to the bombings, Thaksin and his allies had stepped up their political attacks on the Surayud administration. While interim Thai Rak Thai party leader Chaturon Chaiseng criticized the continued imposition of restrictions on political freedoms, an associate of former Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (who has moved closer to Thai Rak Thai) fed reporters allegations that Surayud had undeclared assets. While this claim appeared to lack substance, it raised tangential questions about how Surayud had acquired a plot of land on which he maintains a residence. Meanwhile, a figure heading an anti-coup group made headlines by complaining that General Sonthi had committed bigamy.

¶5. (C) These political maneuvers came in the context of the RTG intensifying its efforts to find grounds for prosecuting Thaksin, targeting members his immediate family as well as

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the former Prime Minister himself (ref C). We had detected indications that Thaksin hoped to reach an accommodation with the CNS and RTG leaders, but the authorities appear uninterested in negotiations, as the legitimacy of their coup d'etat depends in part on establishing extensive wrongdoing by Thaksin.

THAKSIN'S FOES WERE TARGETED BEFORE...

¶6. (C) Many observers will find it plausible that Thaksin or his supporters may have orchestrated bombings in order to discredit those who overthrew him. During the last two years of Thaksin's administration, there were numerous incidents in which bombs were placed at Bangkok sites associated with Thaksin's opponents, including:

- On March 27, 2006, an unexploded bomb was discovered next to the Democrat Party headquarters (ref I);
- On March 9, 2006, a small bomb exploded at a guardpost outside the house of Privy Councilor Prem Tinsulanonda (ref J); on the same day, a bomb exploded at the Royal Vajiravut College, targeting anti-Thaksin academic Chai-anan Samutthawanit;
- On February 22, 2006, a small bomb exploded at the Santi Asoke Buddhist Sect, associated with leading Thaksin opponent Chamlong Srimuang;
- On December 8, 2005, a small bomb exploded at a phone booth outside of Lumpini Park, which had become a site for recent anti-Thaksin rallies; and
- On November 3, 2005, a small bomb exploded on property of the Manager Media Group, owned by leading Thaksin critic Sondhi Limthongkul.

¶7. (C) Additionally, security officials reported the discovery of explosive material in a car parked close to Thaksin's residence on August 24, 2006 (ref H). At the time,

many people suspected Thaksin's loyalists engineered the incident in order to generate sympathy for Thaksin, or to justify imposing a state of emergency. The truth behind this incident remains unclear.

... BUT THAKSIN'S DENIAL NOT IMPLAUSIBLE

¶8. (C) While it is not difficult to imagine pro-Thaksin operatives carrying out the earlier bombings, the devices used were significantly less powerful than the December 31 bombs, and the Thaksin-era detonations clearly targeted the Prime Minister's opponents. Thaksin has publicly denied having a role in the New Year's Eve bombings, and this denial seems plausible, given the differences in the modus operandi; the extensive scrutiny the government was already applying to Thaksin and his loyalists; indications from open sources that Thaksin wanted to return to Thailand; and the fact that political allegations against the CNS (see above) had successfully garnered prominent coverage and put the CNS and RTG on the defensive, seemingly obviating the need at this stage for Thaksin to order desperate measures.

SOUTHERN MILITANTS NOT RULED OUT

¶9. (C) In a January 1 discussion with the Ambassador (ref A), CNS Secretary General Winai Phattiyakul acknowledged a possibility that southern militants had carried out the attacks, noting the bombs used on New Year's Eve were similar to those constructed by the militants in the past. To date, however, southern militants have not attacked targets outside of the South. (Ref K noted several reasons, including organizational, linguistic, and ethnic factors, why militant activities generally have been restricted to the southern border provinces.) Nevertheless, in recent months -- albeit prior to the September 19 coup -- the militants have conducted coordinated bombings that would have an economic impact:

- In a September 16 attack (ref E), six bombs exploded in stores and streets in Hat Yai, a Buddhist-majority city which serves as a commercial center in southern Thailand and draws

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foreign tourists from Malaysia. Several people died, and at least 60 were injured. (Hat Yai has been the target of significant separatist attacks before.)

- In an August 31 daylight attack, at least 23 bombs exploded at banking facilities in the southern province of Yala (ref G), marking a significant expansion of attacks against commercial targets.

¶10. (SBU) Prime Minister Surayud has made a concerted effort to promote reconciliation with disaffected Muslims in Thailand's southern provinces. In early November, visiting the South, he offered a public apology for the deaths of scores of people during and after demonstrations at Tak Bai in 2004. (This apology, welcomed by Thai Muslims, was controversial; some Thais deemed it too strong of an acknowledgement of wrongdoing by the security forces.) Shortly afterwards, the Office of the Attorney General dropped all charges against 81 protesters involved in demonstrations at Tak Bai (ref D), and Surayud ordered government agencies to destroy any existing "blacklists" of suspected troublemakers in the South.

¶11. (C) Despite these gestures, militant activity in the South has continued at a steady pace, indicating that some separatists are disinclined to accept the olive branch which Surayud extended. Some of our contacts assess that the continued violence in the South since the coup is, in part, an effort by separatists to undermine Surayud's attempt at reconciliation. A widespread perception that southern separatists carried out the Bangkok bombings would entail a

significant loss of face for Surayud and could result in public demand for more aggressive security tactics in the South.

ALTERNATIVE THEORIES: JUSTIFYING MILITARY RULE...

¶12. (C) We cannot at this stage rule out another theory, that persons associated with the current regime carried out the bombings to create a pretext for extending military rule. Small pieces of circumstantial evidence could bolster this idea. Critics might point out that the authorities have been slow to ease political restrictions. The administration has not yet forwarded for royal endorsement the decree to lift martial law in much of the country. In late December, the authorities considered but rejected a proposal to annul restrictions on political party activities, claiming the situation was not yet sufficiently stable -- despite the CNS having just secured over 550 million Baht (over 15 million USD) to form a new "Special Operations Centre," over 13,000-strong, accountable directly to the CNS.

... OR A MANIFESTATION OF INTER-SERVICE RIVALRY?

¶13. (C) The hypothetical involvement of members of the security forces in the bombings might not necessarily have been at the behest of the CNS. We note that, since the coup, the new regime has generated ideas about how to reorganize (read: marginalize) the national police force. When a member of a Surayud-endorsed working group floated a decentralization proposal in mid-November, media reports quoted National Police spokesman Lieutenant General Achirawit Suphanphesat as saying "Please don't treat the police organization with contempt. Give us some respect. The day we are transferred to local organizations, the country will go up in flames."

¶14. (C) It is possible to imagine that figures in the police might have been complicit in the December 31 attacks. We have heard scattered reports consistent with this theory; for example, some of the police booths which were bombed should have been manned around the clock but were empty when attacked. We also have heard some closed circuit television cameras near targeted areas became dysfunctional shortly before the bombings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

¶15. (C) Prior to the bombings, many of our contacts predicted political instability in the coming months. Assessing the interim administration as likely to prove relatively ineffective, they believed students, NGOs, and other groups

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would hold large demonstrations to advance their agendas, particularly to influence the shape of the next constitution. None of our contacts foresaw a bombing campaign, however.

¶16. (C) We do not rule out the possibility that the December 31 attacks might prove to be a one-off event. Without knowing the culprits and their motives, we cannot assess whether they would deem further attacks to be in their interests. However, the perpetrators remain on the loose, and, in the absence of significant changes to the political environment, they may well retain the same motive that prompted the first wave of bombings.

¶17. (C) The areas targeted on December 31 do not represent foreign interests. The target selection, the nature of the bombs, and the bombers' seeming intention not to maximize casualties, lead us to doubt strongly the involvement of the Jemaah Islamiyah international terrorist network. We note, however, that if the bombers wanted to damage the Thai economy, tourist areas, or other high-profile sites where foreigners gather, could become targets.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) The physical evidence from the bombings is under examination. Many of the specialists with the metropolitan police, which has jurisdiction in this matter, have received USG training, and we are optimistic they can conduct a capable forensic analysis. We worry, however, that the authorities jumped to a conclusion and announced their views prematurely. Their credibility now depends on showing the involvement of Thaksin or his associates, who, whether involved or not, will surely try to spin recent events to advance their own interests. The stakes are high, and the investigation could be politicized down to the working level.

Given that many previous bombings, attempted bombings, and alleged attempted bombings remain unsolved, we are not optimistic that the perpetrators -- or the mastermind -- will be uncovered.

BOYCE